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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5858
INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0119
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 1395
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 3796
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001109

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: NEW INDEPENDENT SHIA CLERICAL GATHERING HAS
SUCCESSFUL FIRST MONTH

REF: BEIRUT 980

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The newly launched Shia Independent Clerical Gathering (ICG) celebrated several significant benchmarks within its first month, such as hosting a successful iftar during Ramadan and gaining the "moral backing" of Shia parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, independent Shia political activist Lokman Slim told poloff September 30. Although the ICG has not developed its own structures and relies on the services of Slim's other organizations to assist, he believes the ICG could play a beneficial role in the wider Shia clerical establishment as a counterweight to Hizballah. The ICG's founder, Sheikh Ahmad Taleb, may harbor ambitions to become head of the Higher Shia Council and thus view the ICG as one more credential, Slim speculated. Other Shia religious groups have recently emerged and could compete with the ICG, although Slim assessed that those other groups are too closely affiliated with the majority March 14 coalition and lack credibility in the Shia community. End summary.

THREE BENCHMARKS WITHIN A MONTH

2. (C) The Independent Clerical Gathering (Al-Liq'a Al-Ulama'i Al-Mustaqil) has the potential to provoke change within the wider Shia clerical establishment as a counter to Hizballah's dominance, said Lokman Slim, independent Shia political activist and director of NGO Hayya Bina (a USG-grant recipient). The ICG achieved three important benchmarks within its inaugural month, according to Slim: its official launch on August 20 (reftel); the regular appearance of founder, Sheikh Ahmad Taleb, on a special program aired on parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri's NBN television network during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan; and the hosting of an iftar on September 16 that was attended by 225 religious, political and business leaders. During the iftar, covered in several local press outlets, Taleb reaffirmed the group's intention to remain independent of any political party and to provide an outlet for moderate Shia sheikhs and other religious figures to express their opinions. In addition, on September 29, Berri invited members of the ICG for a private lunch at his Beirut office compound that was not widely reported in the press, but confirmed to poloff by Berri's advisor Ali Hamdan on October 3. Berri publicly claims,

however, that he is equidistant from all Shia religious groups.

ICG HAS VISION, BUT NO INDEPENDENT STRUCTURE

13. (C) Although the ICG has become an established entity, it has no structure behind it, reported Slim. Hayya Bina's staff and the staff of the "Leadership Academy" (a Hayya Bina-supported seminary for Shia clerics in Beirut's Hizballah-controlled southern suburbs) provide all back-office support, such as the printing of press releases, to the ICG. Taleb's co-founder of the ICG, Sheikh Mohammed Ali al-Hajj, is also the headmaster of the academy. (Note: The Leadership Academy -- that began operations within the scope of a MEPI-funded grant to the International Republican Institute -- initially encountered difficulties recruiting serious clerical students and was presented with offers by Hizballah to partner with some of Hizballah's religious seminaries following its establishment in 2008. It is likely that the ICG will face similar difficulties. End note.) When asked about the possibility of competition between Taleb and al-Hajj, Slim discounted the assumption, claiming that the two are mutually dependent on one another, "The hawza (academy) needs Taleb for his religious credentials and political support, and Taleb needs us to make the ICG function," he said.

TALEB'S ASPIRATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF THE SHIA COUNCIL

14. (C) Taleb, Slim analyzed, also has aspirations to one day become president of the Higher Shia Council, currently under the leadership of Mufti Abdel Amir Qabalan, who is also close to Berri. (Note: Qabalan, since his appointment in 1994, has retained the position of vice president, while the presidency has remained vacant since the death of Imam Mohammed Mahdi Shamseddine in 2000. It is rumored that Hizballah has blocked Qabalan's promotion. End note.) Based on Taleb's religious credentials, he could be a candidate, Slim rationalized, although he would need to win the support of both the secular and religious members under the council's leadership. The secular members of the council include current and former Shia members of parliament and ministers, Shia members of professional syndicates, and Shia diplomats, among others. Slim estimated that Taleb would likely also encounter challenges from those members of the council who are sympathetic to or members of Hizballah, whose influence on the council continues to increase, he said. The Higher Shia Council, for its part, has maintained limited protocol involvement with Taleb and the ICG by sending representatives to both the launch of the group and the iftar but has bristled at suggestions that the ICG is challenging the authority of the council.

COMPETITION AMONG THE SHIA GROUPS?

15. (C) Online media outlet NOWLebanon, as well as widely-circulated local opposition newspaper Al-Akhbar, published several stories about the ICG in the last month, although several of them had factual inaccuracies, Slim complained. He clarified that Taleb's group is a separate from the Lebanese Ulema Gathering (Al-Liqa'a Al-Ulama'i Al-Lubnani), which was recently relaunched in the predominantly Shia southern city of Nabatieh after a failed attempt in 2007 to establish itself. At that time, the members of Lebanese Ulema Gathering were viewed as "too friendly with (Sunni) Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri and his March 14 coalition" to be taken seriously by the Shia community, he said. Slim maintains that it is "better to be labeled as an independent Shia rather than pro-March 14," especially as sectarian tensions are increasing.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The ICG is beginning to carve its niche in Shia clerical circles and in the wider community. The actual objectives of the organization nonetheless remain opaque and its chances of success unclear. While the "marriage" between Taleb and al-Hajj might pay dividends for both organizations, the "moral backing" and indirect political cover of Berri for the organization could eventually undermine the ICG's claims of independence.

SISON